

■ ELECTORAL MUDDLING

The Unmaking of Doña Violeta

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On February 25 the man George Bush described as "an unwanted animal at a garden party," Daniel Ortega, will be re-elected President of Nicaragua, and his ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front is likely to win a majority of seats in the new National Assembly in elections that will be supervised by hundreds of international observers. That's not left-wing wishful thinking but a prediction based on a series of opinion polls conducted between October and December 1989, which showed the Sandinistas ahead of their nearest rivals by an average of ten points. More recent polls are wildly contradictory: A survey by the U.S. firm of Greenberg-Lake shows Ortega with a 51-to-24-percent lead, while two January polls by Latin American firms—published in the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*—give Violeta Chamorro of the National Opposition Union (UNO) a 7-to-8-percent lead.

On the face of it a Sandinista victory would seem improbable. The Nicaraguan economy is shot to pieces; in 1988 inflation reached 35,000 percent; workers' wages have fallen 90 percent in real terms since 1981; education and health care—once the shining jewels in the Sandinista crown—are a mess; and infant malnutrition is on the rise. Many in the country, perhaps even a majority, now blame the F.S.L.N. for the economic problems. Nicaragua has had more than ten years of Marxist-inspired revolutionary government and, as in Eastern Europe, plenty of people are fed up and ready for change. In such circumstances what government on earth could hope to be re-elected, except in a fraudulent poll?

But this question ignores an even more compelling reality: The political opposition to the Sandinistas is morally and ideologically bankrupt. Corrupt, bickering and divided, tainted by years of complicity with the *contras* and the Reagan Administration or by feeble passivity, the opposition does not offer a credible alternative to the F.S.L.N., which is why the Sandinistas look set to repeat their 1984 election victory. Of all the problems the opposition has to confront, perhaps the greatest is its disunity. There are now twenty-one legal parties in Nicaragua, plus a few more still trying to get enough signatures to register. The right in Nicaragua does what the left does everywhere else: It divides and fragments until it is reduced to a myriad of tiny factions busily trading insults.

Until March 1979, just before the Sandinistas took power, the Conservatives were united in the National Conservative Alliance. Today the alliance has splintered into

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five different Conservative parties, all jostling for the same political space. Worse than the splits themselves has been the public way in which the leaders of the various groups have attacked one another. Almost every break has been accompanied by vitriolic personal insults and by litigation to determine who will control the party assets and keep the party name. Mario Rappaccioli, leader of the National Conservative Party, once commented to me about Miriam Argüello—who had just founded the Popular Conservative Alliance Party—"Poor Miriam, she is not right in the head. I've talked to her doctor; it's because she is so ugly and was never able to find a man who would marry her. . . ." Argüello and Rappaccioli are now supposed to be allies.

The Liberals have also split into four parties—two right-wing holdovers from Somoza's old Nicaraguan Liberal Party, a center-left group close to the F.S.L.N. and the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), which has steadily moved from alliance with the Sandinistas to the right. The Social Christians, too, have split four ways—two groups remain within UNO while two are part of the more moderate center bloc. The Social Democrats are almost paragons of restraint, with just two organizations—but then one of them was a split from the Conservatives in the first place. Profligacy rules on the left, too: There are two communist parties, two Trotskyist parties, a leftist group that fits no labels and a center-left party fighting for Central American union. Enrique Bolaños, a right-wing business leader, says it's simply a matter of ego. "They all want to be able to tell their grandchildren that they were once a presidential candidate. They put personal interests ahead of national ones."

Out of this alphabet soup has emerged UNO, a coalition of eleven parties cobbled together with money and pressure from the U.S. Embassy and blessed with support from *The*

New York Times, which describes it as "the only . . . genuinely democratic ticket in the running."

Unfortunately, these "genuine democrats" still have a problem sticking together. The largest party that was to have joined the alliance, the centrist Social Christian Party (P.S.C.), led by Erick Ramírez, pulled out following allegations of misuse of party funds and a bitter argument between Ramírez and fellow party leader Agustín Jarquín (who inevitably created a Social Christian party of his own). The center-left Popular Social Christian Party (P.P.S.C.), a former ally of the Sandinistas and a participant in the 1984 elections, also pulled out of UNO amid rumors that party members were planning to take their leader, Mauricio Díaz, to court for misappropriating donations to the party coffers.

At the same time, again under pressure from the United States, UNO leaders agreed to allow two communist parties to join their alliance to create the impression of a broad national front united in opposition to Sandinista "dictatorship." The communists were eager to join the coalition in the hope that in the event of an UNO victory they would be given Cabinet posts with the power of political patronage, without which they would fast become moribund. The decision to admit the communists upset the most conservative members of the coalition. Meanwhile, some members of the orthodox communist group, the Nicaraguan Socialist Party, rebelled, as one of their leaders, Luis Sánchez, rapidly pushed their organization to the right and formally renounced Marxism-Leninism. Sánchez's father, who had founded the party, was so disgusted that he agreed to stand as a candidate for the F.S.L.N., while other members deserted to other left-wing groups.

The selection of UNO candidates for president and vice president almost tore apart the remainder of the fragile coalition. As Jarquín admitted in an interview, UNO doesn't have any leaders of presidential caliber. Asked who his choice would be, Jarquín suggested Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo. The coalition leaders agonized for days and went through ten rounds of voting before bowing to pressure from the U.S. Embassy and choosing Violeta Chamorro to head the ticket, with Virgilio Godoy as her running mate. Gilberto Cuadra, president of Cosep, the private business organization that had led the anti-Sandinista opposition for ten years, was furious, claiming the voting had been fixed. "It is not a winning slate capable of defeating the Sandinistas," he complained.

The UNO ticket proved embarrassing in other ways: Godoy had steadfastly fought Chamorro's selection, stating in an interview that she was "good-for-nothing." Godoy is leader of the PLI and had been Minister of Labor in the first Sandinista Administration, leaving to run as the PLI presidential candidate in the 1984 elections. As Labor Minister he had rammed unwelcome legislation down the throats of the business community and had favored Sandinista unions over locals affiliated with opposition parties. His selection upset the far-right members of UNO, who booed him when the final vote was revealed. Indeed, four parties in the coalition initially refused to accept his nomination. Eventually, after yet another chat with officials at the U.S. Embassy, the par-

ties withdrew their objections and the Cosep leaders shut up.

Chamorro, meanwhile, was chosen for her symbolic value. She is the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, who became a national hero by using his newspaper, *La Prensa*, to campaign against the Somoza dictatorship. Chamorro's assassination in 1978 sparked the first riots that grew into the Sandinista-led revolution. Like Cory Aquino, Doña Violeta, as she is commonly known, carries the appeal of her martyred husband's name, which is why she was invited by the Sandinistas to join the first postrevolutionary junta in 1979.

But Doña Violeta is no politician. Unlike other women on the Nicaraguan political stage, she is clearly out of her depth, referring constantly to her dead husband and to God to explain her actions. "What will you do to revive the economy if you win?" I asked her last year. "God will guide my conscience," she replied. Doña Violeta's most important statements are read from prepared scripts, and her handlers have not yet trusted her enough to let her appear on national television to debate opponents face to face. She also has serious health problems. She suffers from osteoarthritis, and on New Year's Eve she shattered a kneecap in an accident. These problems have forced her to limit her campaign appearances.

To add to this list of woes, Godoy has been accused by members of his own party of stealing thousands of dollars donated to the party by the West German Friedrich Naumann Foundation. The evidence is apparently so compelling that only one member of the 96-strong National Assembly voted against a motion to withdraw Godoy's parliamentary immunity from prosecution. All this may sound like a lot of irrelevant and malicious gossip, but there is little doubt that it is influencing the way people are planning to vote. As one teacher who is fed up with the Sandinistas told me last year, "If UNO [leaders] can't even stop fighting among themselves, how can I have confidence that they will know how to run the country?"

Many people also question what is happening to all the U.S. funds being channeled through the National Endowment for Democracy. In theory Congress has appropriated \$9 million to support the opposition. In practice, according to a study by former C.I.A. analyst David MacMichael, the United States has funneled some \$26 million to the domestic opposition since 1984 [see MacMichael, "The U.S. Plays the Contra Card," February 5]. Nevertheless, more than thirty UNO candidates for municipal and National Assembly elections have withdrawn, and many are complaining about lack of funds. "They are treating it like walking-around money for their personal pleasure," said one Conservative activist.

UNO activists also say that the close links between the coalition and the *contras* have damaged their cause. Among the key figures in UNO are Alfonso Robelo and Alfredo César, both former members of the *contra* directorate. In November César was forced to resign as director of the UNO campaign after it was revealed that he had written to Enrique Bermúdez, then military commander of the *contras*, urging him not to demobilize his troops until after the elec-

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tions. To make matters worse, several UNO candidates in the municipal elections are former members of Somoza's National Guard.

UNO might have been able to surmount its internal divisions if it had a credible program for solving the country's economic problems. But the coalition's platform is full of empty rhetoric that does little to allay fears that, if UNO wins the election, the old elite will roll back Sandinista efforts to close the yawning gap between rich and poor. It is common knowledge that the UNO manifesto is a rewrite of the "Blue and White Plan," a document drafted by Cosep that aimed to strengthen the private sector and compensate private landowners whose farms were redistributed to landless peasants. UNO promises to raise salaries, spend more on welfare and health programs, compensate farmers, reduce the foreign debt and revitalize the economy, but it offers no hard figures. The unspoken assumption is that Washington will reward an UNO victory with generous dollops of aid.

UNO's lack of political skills was amply demonstrated during the invasion of Panama, when its response was slow and incoherent. In the end it amounted to a tepid endorsement of Bush's little war, a reaction that ran against the overwhelmingly negative feeling in Latin America and did little to quiet fears that Nicaragua might be the next target. What really upset many supporters was that UNO never came out with a strong condemnation of the U.S. raid on the Nicaraguan Ambassador's residence in Panama, which outraged Nicaraguans across the political spectrum. After that, according to many observers, the UNO campaign simply fizzled.

Leaders of UNO also have hampered their cause by insisting that the election is not to establish a working multiparty system in which the Sandinistas and the opposition will continue to dispute power. Rather, as Godoy said in an interview, UNO regards the election as "a plebiscite between two systems: Sandinista dictatorship or Western-style democracy." But many are reluctant to make so stark a choice, feeling that some Sandinista achievements are worth preserving. Others fear that endorsing UNO would produce a further round of revolutionary change, and therefore a further round of war.

Finally, UNO might have stood a chance if it were the sole opposition group. But the opposition is not monolithic, and UNO is far from the only credible alternative to the Sandinistas. It has to contend with the Conservative Democratic Party of Nicaragua (P.C.D.N.), which won 14 percent of the vote in the 1984 elections and is one of the best-organized opposition groups. While UNO leaders were living the high life in Costa Rica or Miami, or looking for support in Europe and Washington, the P.C.D.N. got on with the serious business of opening party offices and recruiting members [see Jenkins, "Nicaragua's Disloyal Opposition," April 12, 1986].

UNO also will lose votes to Erick Ramírez's Social Christian Party, which is now backed by Edén Pastora, a one-time Sandinista hero and *contra* leader who has returned to the country. Pastora still commands popular support, and

his attacks on UNO have been much fiercer than those on the Sandinistas. He says—and many voters on February 25 may agree with him—that the Sandinistas are evolving toward a Western European style of social democracy while UNO threatens to revert to "Somocista fascism." □